

***“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” (Ezekiel 36:25-27).***

***Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:3-8).***

Man is a fallen creature. We often hear this, but what does it mean? Fallen from what? To say that man has fallen means that since the first man sinned against his Creator, as man's representative, the effects of sin have been passed down to all who follow. Adam and Eve were created in a perfect state of innocence. In His creation, God provided everything they needed for themselves and their descendants to live purposeful and contented lives. In their innocence and unfallen state, the first man and woman possessed complete free will. God chose to test their love and obedience to Him by commanding the first man and woman not to eat from a specific tree in the garden. God warned them that if they ate from that tree, death would certainly follow. Tempted by Satan, Adam and Eve chose to disregard their Maker's commands, risking their perfect situation by eating from the forbidden tree. The Word of God teaches us that as a result of this action, all humans inherit a sinful nature and will inevitably die. This is why we can say that man is a fallen creature! The Apostle Paul expressed it like this, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.” (Romans 5:12).

Due to this sinful nature, humanity is born with an inclination toward wrongdoing. We live in an era where so many are unconcerned about sin. Many people, if they believe in the existence of sin, consider it merely a minor issue and think that, because God is forgiving, everything will turn out fine in the end. However, because of sin, all people are born spiritually dead. In other words, sin has spiritually blinded humanity and separated us from God, leaving us

in desperate need of a radical transformation. The theologian John Murray provides this description of mankind. He writes, “Man is totally corrupt; sin has taken possession of his whole being. The inmost springs of desire, disposition, and motive are corrupted or depraved: the source of intellectual, emotional, and volitional activity is enmity against God. Man is under the dominion of sins.”<sup>1</sup> One cannot read the entirety of God’s infallible and inerrant Word, the Bible, and fail to reach the same conclusion as Professor Murray!

The Scripture verses quoted at the beginning of this paper presuppose the truth that mankind is born spiritually dead. Due to man’s fallen, sinful condition, we are all utterly dependent on God to sovereignly grant us spiritual life. The Lord Jesus Christ characterizes this work of God as someone who has been “born again,” or as some Bible translations have it, “born from above.” The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel describes it as receiving a “new heart and a new spirit.” Sin, in all its forms, has infected humanity and indeed God’s creation itself. The “lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life”<sup>2</sup> dominate this world. God’s holy laws are broken repeatedly by each of us. Although many are unaware, they are in dire need of drastic change. The best news of all is that the Creator has not forsaken mankind, and a profound change, known in theology as regeneration, is an essential part of God’s redemptive plan!

This study continues a series of investigations into the application of redemption that Christians receive through their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The first study in this series is titled “A Study on God’s Electing Grace,” followed by the second study titled “A Study on God’s Call in Salvation.”<sup>3</sup> This current paper explores the Doctrine of Regeneration and builds upon prior studies mentioned. In both previous studies, a list, often referred to in Reformed theology as the order of salvation, is provided. This list serves as a framework within theology, outlining a logical sequence of events through which God applies the benefits of Christ’s redemption to His people. It is essential to note that this logical sequence is viewed from a human perspective. As time-bound individuals, we perceive these truths as a sequential process. The eternal God, who knows the end from the beginning, has no limitations regarding time or

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<sup>1</sup> John Murray, Vol. 2 *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1977) 168

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 2:16.

<sup>3</sup> Both prior studies can be found here: <https://reedrusniak.academia.edu/research#papers>

sequence! The current study intends to consider the third event. For your reference, the complete list of the “order of salvation”<sup>4</sup> is provided below.

- 1) Election refers to God’s choice of people to be saved.
- 2) The Gospel Call (God calling sinners out of darkness).
- 3) Regeneration (being born again).**
- 4) Conversion (faith and repentance).
- 5) Justification (right legal standing).
- 6) Adoption (membership in God’s family).
- 7) Sanctification (proper conduct of life).
- 8) Perseverance (remaining a Christian).
- 9) Death (going to be with Christ).

In America, during the 1976 presidential election, Jimmy Carter, who ultimately won, announced that he was “born again.” This phrase, which, according to John 3, are the words of Christ, was quickly covered by the American press. During this period in America, it was common to read in the media and hear on television that so-and-so was “born again.” While I believe President Carter, a Southern Baptist from Georgia, was sincere in his beliefs, the phrase was soon misused and misunderstood by many. Soon, the adage that “familiarity breeds contempt” became true! A “born again” Christian is often perceived by many as a close-minded fundamentalist who has no concern for others! Thankfully, we can be grateful that the Word of God provides light and truth to what the world does not understand!

In Titus chapter three, the Apostle Paul provides a vivid description of what it means to be regenerated, or “born again.” He writes, “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of **regeneration** and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” (Titus 3:3-7). In this remarkable passage of

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<sup>4</sup> The Latin term, *ordo salutis*, (Order of Salvation), was in prominent usage during the Protestant Reformation.

Scripture, we learn what regeneration is, why it is so necessary, and the source or cause of regeneration. Our study will examine each of these three aspects of regeneration.

A fundamental yet accurate definition of regeneration, taken from L. Berkhof's Systematic Theology, states, "Regeneration is a creative work of God, and is therefore a work in which man is purely passive, and in which there is no place for human co-operation."<sup>5</sup> The emphasis that the writer places on this simple definition is that regeneration is solely the work of God. As humanity, we have no active role in the process. This truth often does not sit well with people, but it is a truth found in Scripture. As quoted from the verse at the beginning of this study, Jesus makes this truth crystal clear. He says that being born again is like the wind blowing. We do not know when it will blow or where it will blow! Jesus stated, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8).

In the redemption of a believer in Christ, our upcoming study on the topic of conversion will reveal that the believer does have a role in this process. However, this is not the case for our current study on regeneration. Like the previous studies on the doctrine of election and God's calling, regeneration is the complete and gracious work of God, planned before the foundations of the world. Paul's words to Titus make this very clear. "But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, **he saved us**, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but **according to his own mercy**, by the washing of regeneration." (Titus 3:4-5a). In the early part of the Gospel of John, the apostle wants to highlight this truth. We read in the first chapter these words, speaking of Jesus; the apostle writes, "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh ***nor of the will of man, but of God.***" (John 1:11-13).

The late R.C. Sproul offers a helpful comment regarding God's role in regeneration. "That application via regeneration and faith is not a joint venture between the sinner and the Spirit. The Spirit does not regenerate those who believe. No, He regenerates the unbelieving sinner unto faith. He quickens to spiritual life those who are dead in sin. He changes the recalcitrant heart of the sinner, making the unwilling willing to come to Christ. He makes the indisposed disposed to Him, the disinclined wholly inclined. Our salvation is entirely of God.

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<sup>5</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1941) 465

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup> When I think of regeneration, I often recall the account of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. The dead man had been in the tomb for days, unable to help himself return to life! However, at the mighty cry of Jesus, the Living Word, the Apostle John writes, “he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’”<sup>7</sup> In a spiritual sense, outside of a relationship with Jesus Christ, we are just like Lazarus! We are in desperate need of a power beyond ourselves. Dear Reader, if you are a Christian, you know deep down that you had no ability to save yourself, and it was God’s powerful doing that saved you! To God be all glory and honor forever!

In Titus chapter three, we also learn why regeneration is so necessary. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the apostle writes, “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, *slaves to various passions and pleasures*, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.” (Titus 3:3). Before a believer's new birth, Scripture tells us that we are slaves due to sin! This echoes the words of Jesus when he said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). The truth of man’s depravity reflects what we previously established at the beginning of this paper. Outside of a union with the Lord Jesus Christ, man is spiritually dead in sin. The Adamic nature is received by all at birth! God must first work within us to enable us to receive or respond to His call. Douglas Kelly, in his *Systematic Theology*, helps us gain a deeper understanding of man’s condition and need. He writes, “First, we must consider the context which explains the all-encompassing nature of His work within us. And that is total depravity, which means that sin has corrupted all parts of our being. To follow the traditional delineation of this depravity, we note that sin has polluted the fountain of the mind, will, and emotions that make us who we are as fallen humans, ‘Total’ does not mean that we are as bad as could be, but rather that every faculty of our being is affected negatively.”<sup>8</sup> Given our spiritual blindness, is it any wonder that we need God to awaken us?

Writing to the church at Ephesus, the Apostle Paul provides a striking description of a person who is outside a relationship with Jesus Christ. He writes, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the

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<sup>6</sup> R.C. Sproul, “The Holy Spirit in Regeneration,” Ligonier, July 1, 2004, <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/can-these-bones-live>, (Underline in text was added).

<sup>7</sup> John 11:43

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Kelly, *Systematic Theology Volume Three* (Ross-Shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2021) 125

prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Ephesians 2:1-3). My friend, the Bible leaves us with no doubt that the “washing of regeneration” is essential for entering the Kingdom of God. You must be “born again.” As you read these words, I kindly ask if this holds true for you?

Along with defining regeneration and highlighting its necessity, Paul’s words in his letter to Titus reveal the glorious source of this magnificent work. In our previous study on a person’s calling to Christ, we discovered that the calling event in the application of redemption is primarily the work of God the Father. However, in the singular act of regeneration, Scripture assigns this role principally to the work of God the Holy Spirit. The apostle writes, “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, ***by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*** whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Titus 3:4-6). This washing and regeneration is one of the great promises of God in the New Covenant. The Old Testament prophets foretold this long before the birth of Christ. This is what the prophet Ezekiel said. “And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And ***I will put my Spirit within you*** and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Scripture reveals the work of redemption as a threefold activity of the Godhead. In redemption, it is the Father who designs and plans our redemption. It is the Father who sends the Son into the world and, together with the Son, sends the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration is a profound mystery. Those who have been born again by the Holy Spirit do not all experience regeneration in the same way, and we should expect nothing less! God works in ways that we cannot understand. To describe the new birth, our Lord used an analogy of the wind blowing, illustrating that we do not know where it comes from or where it goes. This unknowing aspect is the same with the Holy Spirit’s work in regeneration. Some individuals go through an intense experience that leaves no doubt about the significant work God has done in their lives. In contrast, others may be regenerated by God without any specific recollection of when it occurred. This is often true for children who grow up in Christian homes or for those who become believers at a young age. Usually, they gradually deepen their understanding of the

gospel and may not experience a dramatic transformation. Whether it is a profound experience or simply one that cannot be recalled, in both cases, their lives are transformed. Each person who has been regenerated is a new creation. The Apostle Paul describes what has happened:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Among other indicators, there will be a longing to read God’s Word and to know the Savior. Genuine regeneration, often referred to as the “new birth,” will manifest results in a person’s life. That person is NOT perfect and is still a sinner. However, by the grace, work, and power of the Holy Spirit, this individual is now a member of the kingdom of God! Jesus’ teaching to Nicodemus in John 3 makes this very clear: “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

In our brief study of the doctrine of regeneration, we have explored three aspects of the topic. First, we considered a simple definition, borrowing the text from L. Berkhof’s classic work on Systematic Theology. To define regeneration, he writes, “Regeneration is a creative work of God, and is therefore a work in which man is purely passive, and in which there is no place for human co-operation.”<sup>9</sup> Next, we considered the necessity of this work of God. Using Scripture as our guide, we are left with no doubt that, because of sin, we are helpless to attain eternal life! God’s Word makes it very clear that unless and until we have a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, we are spiritually dead. Finally, we considered the source of this great activity, which is the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who awakens us to our need and causes us to be spiritually “born again.” Ephesians 2:1 is very explicit that outside of Christ, we are dead in our sins.

Dear Reader, as I conclude our study, please allow me to ask: Have you been “born again” in Jesus Christ? While it is true that we cannot save ourselves and need regeneration, it is also true that Jesus is willing to accept all who come to Him. That is precisely why He came into this world! The apostle writes in his first letter to Timothy, “It is a trustworthy saying and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus *came into the world to save sinners*” (1 Timothy 1:15). While God plans and executes redemption for His people, He lovingly and graciously invites you to come to Him and confess your sins, turn away from them, and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus promises that “whoever comes to me, I will never cast out” (John 6:37). Is the Lord calling you, my friend? If so, call upon Him, and you will be saved.

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<sup>9</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 465.